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SUBJECT: INDIAN COMMUNISTS EMBRACE VENEZUELAN PRESIDENT

1. SUMMARY. Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez' March 5-6 visit to Calcutta provided West Bengal's Communist government an opportunity to show the world that the Left is still relevant - even if that relevance was expressed mostly through shopworn anti-imperialist sloganeering. Chavez appeared to enjoy the attention and the approving audience he found for his anti-American jabs. END SUMMARY.

2. West Bengal's ruling party, the Communist Part of India-Marxist (CPM), pulled out all the stops to welcome "Comrade" Chavez on March 5. The hammer-and-sickle fluttered on both sides of the road as the presidential entourage drove past. Party members assembled at prominent intersections to welcome their comrade. "Up, up socialism, down, down capitalism" was the dominant refrain greeting the Venezuelan President as he drove past cheering cadres, waving enthusiastically at them. Although President Chavez was running behind schedule by more than a couple of hours, over 10,000 people waited in a stadium where the Government of West Bengal accorded him a civic reception. To his hosts' embarrassment, however, Chavez' speech in Spanish was murdered by an interpreter who bungled the Bengali translation of such simple - yet crucial - words as "imperialism" and "truth." Finally, with Chavez playing to the home crowd by reciting a poem by Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore in Spanish, Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee banished the offending interpreter and came out with the original Bengali version himself, setting off huge rounds of applause. The visiting President pardoned his comrades for the interpreter's gaffes and newspapers the next day splashed pictures of the Venezuelan President embracing a beaming Bengal CM.

3. According to press accounts, Chavez played up his differences with the United States on several occasions during the brief visit. At the reception, he stated, "I want to strengthen Third World unity against the U.S. This is one of the reasons why I have come to India;" and, "The U.S. cannot expect to grab and enjoy all the good things in the world. We will not let that happen." He also warned, "There is one person who will be responsible if anything happens to me -- U.S. President George Bush." Regarding Venezuela's energy exports he stated, "We will provide more oil to countries like India and China. We have come forward to help India with oil so that it can become a front ranking country in the world." In wishing the Chief Minister a long tenure, he said, "Like the Cuban government, the Communists in West Bengal have been fighting the U.S.-led imperialism for 27 years."

4. On March 6 President Chavez spent the day among school children and in studying the Panchayat system of rural self-governance, an important building block of political power for the CPM. On business matters, West Bengal sought Venezuela's cooperation in petrochemical, leather, agriculture and marine products processing industries. The Government of West Bengal also requested the Venezuelan President to consider opening a consular office in Calcutta. For all the warm rhetoric, however, there was no evidence of any concrete outcomes.

5. COMMENT. The Calcutta leg of Hugo Chavez's visit was about photo opportunities, public relations and ideological bonding for the West Bengal government. The Indian Left remains opposed to most U.S. policies even as the majority has reluctantly accepted the need for foreign investment, and especially American investment, to drive economic growth. In this context, the strong anti-U.S. statements by the Venezuelan President were evocative of a simpler time when ideology was unsullied by considerations of economic reality. As a practical matter, with Venezuela offering to sell oil and possibly open some of its oil blocks to India, the Chavez-CPM camaraderie may also provide a future role for the Left in India's energy diplomacy. END COMMENT.

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